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Characteristics of Safe and Responsive Schools

(Posted January 14, 2002)

The violence that affects our communities has found its way through the schoolhouse door. Recent, highly publicized acts of school violence committed by troubled youths have shaken our belief that our schools are safe. With reports that bullying, hazing, and other forms of violence remain at significant levels, we must take strong, positive steps to safeguard the physical, emotional, and mental well being of our children.

Fortunately, current statistics suggest that the odds of a student dying in school, by homicide or suicide, are less than one in a million. In fact, reports suggest that lightning is three times more likely to kill a child than school violence. And less than one percent of student deaths altogether occur in schools—even though one death is too many. The sad truth is that far more young people die in our communities or homes—although the situation often first arises or otherwise develops in school.

Prevention of child violence requires more than just preventing school violence. It requires a broad societal effort where all stakeholders in schools, churches, homes, and communities acknowledge the problem and work together to find solutions. In particular, Catholic schools are called to model academic excellence and faith development and to create a supportive and challenging atmosphere that affirms the dignity of all people in the school community. VIRTUS® is committed to making our schools as safe as possible while on their educational quest so that teachers can teach and students can learn. All schools must have the latest knowledge about preventing school violence, as well as the necessary resources, tools and support to make it happen.

One way to make schools safer is for all stakeholders to have an understanding of the characteristics of a school that is safe and responsive to every child. In response to the tragic school shootings over the past few years, a document entitled, *Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools*, was distributed to every school in this nation. *Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools* was developed by the Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice of the American Institute for Research, in collaboration with the National Association of School Psychologists.

This Guide addresses the essential characteristics of well-functioning, effective schools. Safe and responsive schools:

1. Focus on academic achievement. Effective schools communicate clearly that all children can achieve academically and behave appropriately. Adequate resources are made available and individual differences are respected.
2. Involve families in meaningful ways. When families are involved in the growth of their children, students are more likely to experience school success. Schools need to make every effort to have

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parents feel welcome, remove barriers to participation, and keep families engaged in their children's education.

3. Develop links to the community. Effective schools have close ties to families, faith communities, support services, and community organizations and make it a priority to develop meaningful connections.
4. Emphasize positive relationships among students and staff. A critical factor in preventing school violence is the development of a positive relationship between an adult and a child at risk. Effective schools also foster encouraging and supportive relationships among students
5. Discuss safety issues openly. Schools can make an effective difference by teaching about the dangers of firearms, as well as how students can manage angry feelings appropriately and resolve conflicts constructively.
6. Treat students with equal respect. Effective schools communicate that all students are valued and respected. A major source of conflict in schools is that students may perceive that they are being treated unfairly due to race, gender, religion, socioeconomic status, disability, ethnicity, sexual orientation, athletic ability, physical appearance or some other factor. Effective schools respect diversity and demonstrate a sense of concern and community.
7. Create ways for students to share their concerns. Students are usually the first ones to know about bullying, harassment, assault, and potential school shootings. A reporting system must ensure that students have the opportunity to report behaviors that lead to school violence and that students are protected from reprisals.
8. Help children feel safe expressing their feelings. Children need caring school staff to whom they can express their needs, anxieties, and concerns. When children feel disconnected from school staff, the potential for violence increases.
9. Have a procedure in place for reporting children who potentially are abused or neglected. Schools must establish staff guidelines and procedures consistent with state and federal laws that are designed to protect the well being of children.
10. Offer extended-day programs for children. School-based before- and after-care programs can reduce violence. These programs offer a number of options and activities, such as mentoring, tutoring, assistance with homework, computer access, sports, counseling, and community service.
11. Promote good citizenship and character. Schools must help students become productive citizens. They reinforce shared values of their local community, such as respect for others, kindness, honesty, and responsibility. Moreover, they stand for the civic values set forth in our Constitution and Bill of Rights. Effective schools also acknowledge that parents are the primary moral educators of their children and work in partnership with them.
12. Identify problems and assess progress toward solutions. Safe schools continually examine circumstances where students may feel threatened or intimidated. They openly share this information with students, families, and the community and work together to create solutions.
13. Support students in making the transition to adult life and the workplace. Effective schools can provide students with work-study programs, apprenticeships, and community service that will help prepare them for the years ahead.

The most promising prevention and intervention programs involve the entire community working together to form positive relationships with students so that all children feel included. If we understand the characteristics of safe schools, the conditions that lead to violence, and the types of support that are necessary to prevent violence, we can make our schools safer.

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